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ABSTRACT

Understanding and finding solutions to today's social problems can begin with a grounding in the history of moral education. Piety and virtue were among the goals pursued by colonial and early American educators. In pursuing such goals, these educators sought to give their students' lives a sense of purpose. Establishing this sense, and encouraging the values which support it, are avoided in most schools today because doing so is often considered a spiritual pursuit. Today's schools are secular, and thus do not encourage the pursuit of spiritual goals. This reluctance to teach basic morals leads today's students to a crisis of meaning in their lives. In creating such a crisis, this reluctance may be the root of many of society's problems. It is not a simple matter to teach morals. Teachers and teaching are not neutral. But general values and rules of conduct can be taught which are good for all and biased toward none. Teacher education should prepare educators to teach morals, and the integrity of a potential teacher should be a factor in the hiring process. (Includes 15 references.) (JW)

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MORAL EDUCATION: WHERE HAVE WE BEEN? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

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MORAL EDUCATION:

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Perplexed by the overwhelming discipline problems in America's public schools and the overwhelming problem of violence and social disintegration, many professionals in education are becoming much interested in analyzing these problems and looking for solutions. A look back to focus on the beginnings of moral education in our early days is a beginning. What were our assumptions earlier, and where are we today? Have we abandoned our moral heritage?

BEGINNINGS

A good example of our early assumptions in moral education is the statement of goals by an academy at Andover in 1789 established by Samuel and John Phillips. Their first and principal goal was the promotion of PIETY and VIRTUE, both words capitalized. F. Washington Jarvis' "Beyond Ethics" in a 1993 issue of Journal of Education puts focus on these two words.

Virtue is easier to understand. The founders of this academy simply meant virtue as the word indicating good conduct or good ethical behavior. Nearly all

schools founded before 1900 considered virtue a principal object. Knowledge was to be used for public services, and knowledge without goodness was considered dangerous.

Piety was, however, listed first as a goal. Today, we might smile smugly. Piety is not a topic for discussion today. It was perhaps "the" hot topic in academics much earlier, not today. What was meant by piety earlier? It referred to a person's respect for things beyond himself, or a sense of meaning to our being. It is beyond ethics. It reaches to the more important question of purpose and meaning to things, whether hard work is worth it , whether life is worth living.

Jarvis refers to James Thurber's story, "The Sea and the Shore" as good reflection on the meaning and purpose of human life. The story tells of lemmings, little rodents in Scandinavia known for their tendency to rush from the land into the sea to sure death. Thurber's story describes one excited lemming who looks at the setting sun on the ocean and cries out, "Fire! The world is coming to an end!" He rushes wildly into the sea, creating mass hysteria in the other lemmings who rush in panic headlong into the sea. Drowning, some shout, "We are saved!" Others cry, "We are lost!" Thurber explains the moral: People

must learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why. Again, piety requires reflection on the real meaning of our lives.

Very few schools address the question of "why I should live." Perhaps the reason is that public schools today are rather strictly secular. Courts have basically expelled religion. And piety and retrospection are considered religious. The whole aim of classical education was largely religious. This is shown in Massachusetts laws of 1642, 1647, and 1648, which are considered foundation of our present public schools by educational historian Pauline Holmes.

An excerpt showing how schoolmasters were exhorted to instruct their students on piety in colonial times is worth quoting. It comes from recommendations to the schoolmasters by the Committee appointed to carry into execution the Systems of Public Education, adopted by the Town of Boston on October 15, 1789.

> Frequently [to] address their pupils on moral and religious subjects; endeavoring to impress their minds with a sense of the being and providence of God, and the obligations they are under to love, serve, and pray to him; their duty to their parents and masters; the beauty and excellence of truth, justice, and mutual love; tenderness to brute creatures, and the sinfulness of tormenting them and wantonly destroying their lives; the happy tendency of self-government and obedience to the dictates of reason and religion; the duty which they owe their country, and the necessity of a strict obedience to its laws... (Jarvis, 1993, p. 63)

Clearly, these religious foundations have been lost in today's secular education. Piety is not even in our vocabulary today. The founders of our country could never have imagined the banishment of religion from public schools, and would have been astounded at Supreme Court decisions which effectively banished religion from the public schools in the last thirty years.

SEARCHING TODAY

But young people still look for something basic to believe in. They still yearn to discover meaning in life. Some find it in church or synagogue or school. Others look elsewhere. Some fall into Satan worship or other cults. Was Nazism not really a pseudoreligion? Did the spiritually starved, young people in Germany in the 1930's not find a supreme being to whom all loyalty was due? Jarvis suggests we have in our country today a spiritual vacuum of some intensity similar to Hitler's Germany.

What else illustrates our young people's search for something to believe in? Perhaps adolescents numbering 40,000 in attendance at rock concerts are seeking to fill a void in their lives. Some youths follow professional athletic

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teams with the fervor of religion. Some find a sense of identity and meaning in gangs.

While youth yearns for morals and meaning to life, society today says we must not inflict our opinions on others. We must avoid religious and political controversies. Are teachers, then, to be neutral? A better question--is it moral for teachers to be neutral, to remain silent? Should we worry about offending someone in our pluralistic society? The answer is another question. Are rap or rock group idols worried about offending? What about makers of video and porn films? They promote drugs, sex, aggression, and violence. What is the silence of educators promoting?

Jarvis advocates teaching certain truths in official or "hidden" curricula. These can be taught outside a religious context. They are:

1. As human beings, we must recognize our mortality. (All of life should be viewed with our ultimate destiny and its meaning.)
2. Individual humans are not in control of the universe. There are forces in the universe beyond our understanding or control.
3. The greatest human virtue is modesty or humility.
4. Our recognition of our mortality and our modest space in the scheme of things can lead us to a higher vision and responsibility.

5. The good life is hard. Those who live it are the happiest and most productive.

Tigner's article "Character Education: Outline of a Seven-Point Program" suggests the following points, greatly shortened:

1. Take people seriously as persons.
2. Care for friends. Broaden this to a sense of community.
3. Take oneself seriously as a person--take responsibility and be responsible.
4. Be courageous.
5. Be temperate or moderate or a master of self.
6. Be just.
7. Seek wisdom.

Tigner expects these seven points to lead to students who are respectful, friendly, responsible, confident, temperate, fair, and informal.

To elaborate on just the first point, consider Tigner's comments on self-esteem.

> A second notion competing with *seriousness about persons* is the self-esteem movement's advocacy of willful blindness to people's shortcomings in inducing them to feel good about themselves. I am not being serious about persons if I don't distinguish their finer efforts from their failures. Encouragement that doesn't discriminate between excellent and shoddy performance signals the

> positively harmful message that the quality of one's effort doesn't matter. To deprive students of feeling bad about doing less than their best is to deprive them of one of their chief incentives to grow, improve and mature. Much to their detriment, it positively invites them down the easy slide to mediocrity. (Tigner, 1993, p. 16)

The question must be raised whether teachers are doing the moral thing for students when we praise them for poor quality in a effort to raise their self-esteem.

The question of morality in education seems to affect programs of teacher education very little. Should it be a concern? Stengel and Tom suggests the moral nature of teaching should be taken seriously, and that teacher educators should be guided by a vision of students becoming caring, competent and courageous teachers. Moral fitness of teacher candidates (virtues such as honesty, caring, courage, fairness, and practical wisdom) is a reasonable basis for admission and retention. They further suggest that accepting more students than can be responsibly prepared is not moral, as well as preparing teachers who will have little promise of a teaching position.

Assessing teacher candidates for these suggested virtues--honesty, caring, fairness, and practical wisdom--must be done. Sockett suggests documentation by student of service work, caring relationships, work for social and political change, and a statement of commitment. Objections to such assessments of morals come naturally. How can we insure reliability and validity? Who are we to judge these

characteristics in others? Many educators are unwilling to include moral considerations in teacher education programs. A cooperative approach is required, sharing power, to effect such a change.

Leaving the question of morals in university teacher education, what are teachers themselves in the public schools doing in moral education? Not much. Most don't teach morals. Many say they should not, claiming no room in the curriculum, or that parents should teach their own morals. Because of our multi-cultural society, many believe there is no way to determine good and bad character.

But some teachers are really studying the issue, and acting. Gecan and Mulholland-Glaze tell of the designing of the original Jefferson Institute running from June 1990 to August 1991, its success, and later developments. The institute developed in the aftermath of a vicious senior prank reflecting on the integrity of two male faculty members. Students focused on First Amendment Rights. Confusion followed. Was this incident just a prank to be excused, or was the issue really about responsibilities, rights, feelings, and respect? Teachers soon realized that the words "right" and "wrong" had been stripped from the school vocabulary.

The Jefferson Institute addressed some key questions:

1. What is a good life?
2. What constitutes good character?
3. What is virtue?
4. What is a good society?
5. What should the relationship be between the individual and society, and between communities and the state?
6. What kind of human beings should we be? (Gecan and Mulholland-Glaze, 1993, p. 48)

The format was definitely intellectual. Consultants included Tigner, Ryan, and Delattre of Boston University. Time and space does not permit elaboration on their accomplishments, but participants formulated new goals and practices and were renewed in discovering again the joy of learning.

Ryan of Boston University explains why a center for the advancement of ethics and character was founded there in 1989. Its purpose is to address the broad range of issues related to young people acquiring sound ethical values and forming good character. Of course, these issues range from suicide to robbery to homicide to out-of-wedlock births. Society is disintegrating. The nation's value consensus isn't holding. Teachers especially feel a chilling effect.

Teachers came to believe the moral code was whatever was within oneself. Value-neutral approaches were used. The question, "Whose values?" is uppermost.

However, as Americans we have a moral covenant--our Constitution. As human beings we share a heritage of moral ideas, such as fairness to others and

settling differences without violence. Today the notion that our pluralistic society has few shared values is in vogue! Teachers are thinking twice about this as schools break down in civility and amoral classrooms.

A major focus of the center is to remind us that developing good character and powers of ethical thinking are legitimate and expected aspects of a school's mission. Their simple beliefs are:

1) Character education is an essential and inescapable mission of schools.
2) The human community has a reservoir of moral wisdom.
3) The teacher is central.
4) The most important task of America's schools today is passing on to our children our moral wisdom.

Finally, Delattre and Russell, also from Boston University, point to a contrast in moral thinking. A simple little grandmother inspires her grandchildren "to work hard, play hard, and care for others." Joycelyn Elders, former surgeon general of the United States, is asked the question, "Do you believe it's immoral for people to have children out of wedlock?" Her answer: "No. Everyone has different moral standards... You can't impose your standards on someone else."

The grandmother clearly believed that there are better and worse ways to live. Perhaps she effectively was imposing her standards, but she certainly was

not leaving her family to their own devices. Elders resembles many who do not know what a genuinely moral standard is and who mistakenly believes that moral standards do not in any way transcend individual commitments or personal preferences.

CONCLUSION

Moral education is, then, a duty of the classroom teacher. Teaching right from wrong, based on absolutes, is sorely needed today in every classroom. The Jewish and Christian faiths of our forefathers provide the true basic moral foundations our children need. Very few will object and few should confuse teaching morality with teaching a particular faith. We will not lose our freedom of religion by teaching our children right from wrong. The hearts and mind and character of our young hang in the balance. Our future and theirs depend on us. Will we choose action or inaction?

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